

Woman alters tradition to keep faith

By RICHARD WEINS
Of the Emerald

The third woman ever ordained as a rabbi, Laura Geller, addressed a predominately Jewish student audience in the EMU Forum Room Monday. She discussed the historical and modern place of women in Judaism in the final segment of the University YWCA Women/Speak series.

Jewish history is "based on a legal system that our forefathers and foremothers thought was divinely ordained," Geller said. "Traditionally, men were obligated to keep all Jewish commandments, such as praying, while women weren't. Women were permitted to pray, but weren't obligated to, so they didn't do it in formal ways. As a result, women were left with taking care of the family and raising children, but weren't responsible for religious experiences."

A sexual "schism" developed, according to Geller, in which men lived spiritual lives in synagogues while women lived more "physical" lives in their homes.

"I'm an heir to a tradition that offers me a role that isn't satisfactory for me. So what do I do with this history? Some women give up on Judaism and move to another faith. But I could no more give up my Judaism than I could give up my womanhood."

Geller chose instead to work within the system, searching for ways to change Judaism so men and women would be treated equally. Many Jewish rituals are "emotionally labeled masculine, but woman could also do them. There is nothing particularly masculine about bar mitzvah — an acknowledgement that a boy has come to spiritual maturity."

Although there is now a female equivalent to bar mitzvah in the reform and reconstruction movements of Judaism, the advent of adolescence usually brings more rejection than acceptance to Jewish girls.

"Mothers traditionally slap their daughters when their first period begins. By slapping the child, you're scaring away the 'evil eye,' which makes them impure."

The concept of impurity haunts women into adulthood. Geller said "A woman can't touch the Torah because she might be on her period and therefore impure."

Jewish women also desire a ceremony to welcome baby girls to the covenant — an honor currently reserved for boys.

"Some people want a uniquely female ceremony and some want the same ceremony used for boys — except for circumcision. It's all an open question. We must be willing to explore different alternatives."

"When lacking alternatives, women should try the things that have been labeled masculine — start doing stuff men do. For some women, that feels good. For others, that feels weird."

She said a major step forward for the feminist movement in Judaism would be accomplished by "radically redefining our image of God, who, by definition, can't be masculine. God transcends masculinity or femininity, and we were made in God's image. All of us have some sense of androgyny, both maleness and femaleness."

Geller is chaplain of the University of Southern California's Jewish student organization and one of six ordained women rabbis in the world.

The "kosher vegetarian" encountered little opposition in her effort to be ordained, although some fellow students at Hebrew Union College in New York failed to take her seriously.

"They thought I was either there to get married or to prove the point that women could become rabbis. Even now, a lot of people have trouble calling me 'rabbi.'"

Things are not all rosy for the feminist movement in Judaism. No women have been ordained into the conservative movement, and in their prayers, Jewish men still say "Thank you God, for not making me a woman." Geller feels that a major test for the female rabbis will come when they have served long enough to be qualified for advancement.

"Many congregations will welcome us, and may even hire us as associate rabbis. But we may have a lot of trouble moving from our present positions to being hired as head rabbis of congregations that are still male-oriented."



Rabbi Laura Geller

Photo by Carolyn Beaver

PSAF and SALSC

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bers on campus; about 25 students belong to the SALSC.

The RSB did initiate the original SASC, Romanoff says, by putting out a call, back in February for a support organization for the liberation struggle.

SALSC maintains coherence through a set of slogans, adopted by committee consensus, rather than through organized party affiliation.

"Our political unity is crystalized in the slogans," says Romanoff.

"Victory to the Peoples of southern Africa," "Down with apartheid and minority rule," "U.S. out of southern Africa," and "State Board: Dump the southern Africa stocks, now," are the current official slogans — printed on SALSC leaflets and chanted at demonstrations.

Romanoff says PSAF and SALSC don't agree politically and the difference lies in how each group "sees winning things."

Romanoff believes students must play a vanguard role and

SALSC attempts to gather student support through visible action.

While education is important — SALSC has sponsored films and lectures on southern Africa — action is essential, Romanoff says. "The way you get things done isn't by writing letters to your congressman."

And you can't wait until everyone is ready before you demonstrate, she continues.

"You can't start out with 5,000 people," Romanoff says. "To gather a broad base of support you have to start small."

Despite small turnouts at SALSC-sponsored demonstrations and rallies, Romanoff believes support has been growing — both "symbolic and real material support," in the form of participation in southern Africa work.

Divestment is the main focus of the group's activities, but SASC wasn't started just to dump the stocks. The group's first crusade — and one it hopes to spend more time on in the future — was to

keep recruiters from corporations with interests in Southern Africa off campus.

Like PSAF, SALSC lists the State Board divestment vote as one of the group's triumphs, but Romanoff says the State Board, rather than being persuaded by the testimony was pressured by the numbers of people who showed up at the meeting.

The State Board's decision was, Romanoff says, "not a matter of tactics, but a matter of forcing them to sacrifice their own interests."

Terri Dach believes there is no way of persuading them by using logic, because it would be illogical for them to divest stocks that are making a profit. "Finally, when it comes down to it, you just have to say WE WANT THIS."

That's what happened when SALSC members and about 30 other students marched to the chancellor's office last month. And the group doesn't feel the demonstration was misdirected or

mistimed.

"We got tired of waiting," Dach says, "We needed answers now, not after the attorney general's decision."

Romanoff is optimistic about the future of the movement. "I think the stocks are going to be divested; the students will triumph." She says, "Two or three other universities have already begun the divestment process."

But meanwhile, the struggle continues and PSAF and SALSC continue their labors indepen-

dently of each other. There is a communications system between the two groups, but both say they will probably not work together to any great extent.

"We have established relations," Postol says, "If we're going to do something we inform them and vice versa, but because of former problems we're somewhat leery of getting involved."

Romanoff agrees. "We don't see having a combined group ever but we don't see stabbing them in the back. After all we're working for the same thing."



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